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ABSTRACT

The integration of animal-assisted therapy into clinical psychology is a growing phenomenon. These "co-therapists" may be of assistance to counselors when working with withdrawn and non-communicative counselees. The presence of an animal has been found to lower anxiety and motivate the counselee's participation in therapy. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is not considered a style of therapy, but helps build trust between the counselee and counselor. Some common mental health treatment goals associated with AAT are to improve socialization and communication; reduce isolation, boredom, and loneliness; help with affect; lessen depression; and provide affection. School settings are appropriate for integrating AAT and such programs may have a role in helping curb school violence. (JDM)

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Introduction

Recent research and experience has demonstrated that the use of dogs as "co-therapists" may be of assistance to counselors in counseling with withdrawn and non-communicative counselees. The use of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activity (AAA) may be another useful tool which could be offered in counselor education programs and in school counseling programs.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

The integration of animal-assisted therapy into clinical psychology was first credited in 1962 to the child psychologist, Boris Levinson, with his paper published in *Mental Hygiene*, "The dog as a 'co therapist'." Levinson discovered he could make significant progress with a disturbed child when Levinson's dog, Jingles, attended therapy sessions. He went on to find that many children who were withdrawn and uncommunicative would interact positively with the dog (Levinson, 1969). Animal-assisted therapy has a long, but undocumented history, and it has only been in the last half of the twentieth century that research and professional response has been conducted on the use of animals in therapy.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and its related modality, animal-assisted activity (AAA), are both experiencing a rise in popularity and are now being applied in many counseling and school settings across the United States. Cindy Ehlers of Eugene, Oregon took her Husky dog, Bear, to visit with students and others traumatized by the 1998 shootings at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon and the violence in 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Tracy Roberts brings her two Australian Shepherd dogs, Lucy and Dottie, to school to act as teacher's aides in the fourth and fifth grade classes at the Canterbury Episcopal School in DeSoto, Texas. Lucy and Dottie are reported to be a comfort to the kids and a welcome relief from the stress of school. Dena Carselowey and her Labrador Retriever, Buggs, are "co-therapists" at Minneha Core Knowledge Magnet Elementary School in Wichita, Kansas. Each of these dogs provides unconditional acceptance the moment the student enters the classroom or the counselor's office. Often the students will come to see the dog and stay to talk to the counselor while they pet and play with the dogs. When animals are used with the school counselor, the students often use the dog as an excuse to go see the counselor. These animals enable the counselor to interact with many more students than would normally be the case.

Rationale for Animal-Assisted Therapy and Activity

The presence of an animal has been found to lower anxiety and motivate participation in therapy (Fine, 2000). The animal's warm and playful presence can be comforting. AAT is not a style of therapy like Cognitive-Behavioral or Rational-Emotive therapy, however a therapist can incorporate the animal into whatever professional style of therapy the therapist already enacts. AAT sessions can be integrated into individual or group therapy and with a very wide range of age groups and persons with varying ability.

There are many different types of therapy animals. The most common are dogs, cats, and horses. Farm animals can be therapeutic as well as smaller or less common types of animals, such as, rabbits, birds, fish, hamsters, and even llamas. Each of these animals has specific skills and abilities to contribute to the therapeutic process.

Mental health and educational professionals who engage in AAT should demonstrate knowledge and skill in the following areas: 1) social skill development and obedience training for the pet, 2) therapy or activity skill training for the pet and handler, 3) establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with counseling and educational facility staff, 4) assessing the appropriateness of AAT with a particular client or student, 5) the basics of zoonoses (transmittable diseases) and risk management, 6) establishing and applying counseling or educational goals and interventions, and 7) assessing therapeutic or educational progress.

For the therapy dog, obedience training is a must, most preferably in a group format. A therapy animal must be well behaved and respond to the handler's commands. A fearful, aggressive, or unresponsive animal is definitely not suitable for this profession.

Animal-Assisted Counseling

Animal-assisted therapy can be beneficial to the counseling process (Gammonley, et al., 2000). The presence of the animal can facilitate a trust-building bond between the therapist and client. The animal relieves some tension and anxiety of therapy and interacting with the animal is entertaining and fun. Talking to the animal while the therapist listens is easier than talking to the therapist for the more difficult issues. Also, animals often help clients focus on an issue as they interact with the animal. The animal may help the client get in touch with feelings. Sharing these feelings with or about the animal can initiate the emotional sharing process with the therapist. For the client, the animal is seen as a friend and ally, thus presenting a safe atmosphere for sharing. The animal offers nurturance through a presentation of unconditional acceptance and interaction. The experience of a client interacting with an animal can provide knowledge about boundaries and limit setting by observing and imitating the therapist-animal interactions.

Common mental health treatment goals in AAT are to:

- improve socialization and communication;
- reduce isolation, boredom and loneliness;
- brighten affect and mood, lessen depression, and/or provide pleasure and affection;

- improve memory and recall;
- address grieving and loss issues;
- improve self-esteem, be presented with opportunities to succeed and feel important, and improve feelings of self worth;
- improve reality;
- improve cooperation and problem-solving ability;
- improve concentration and attention, and increase engagement;
- decrease manipulative behaviors;
- improve expression of feelings;
- reduce general anxiety;
- reduce abusive behavior;
- improve an ability to trust; and
- learn appropriate touch (Gammonley, et al., 2000).

Common mental health treatment interventions in AAT that assist in meeting the goals listed above may include to:

- practice teaching the animal something new;
- engage in play with the animal and other types of appropriate interactions;
- learn about and practice care, grooming and feeding of the animal;
- learn other information about the animal (breed, history, etc.)
- reminisce about the animal or past animals;
- remember and repeat information about the animal to others;
- take the animal for a supervised walk;
- receive and give appropriate affection and acceptance with the animal;
- discuss how animals may feel in certain situations;
- learn gentle ways to handle animals;
- follow a sequence of instructions with the animal;
- observe and discuss the animal's response to human behavior;
- interpret animal behavior as it happens; and
- generalize animal behavior to human circumstances.

Animals in the Classroom

There can be many benefits to integrating AAT and AAA into the classroom in school settings. Goals for students in school classrooms using AAT and AAA include:

- gaining knowledge about animals;
- learning humane animal care;
- motor and physical skill development through human-animal interactions;
- animal training;
- practicing discipline;
- incorporating an attitude of kindness and compassion;
- learning about nurturance;
- practicing loyalty and responsibility;
- experiencing human-animal bonding;
- learning responsible pet ownership; and
- learning AAT and AAA training and activities (Delta, 1999).

Animal-assisted therapy may be used to curb violence in the schools. Animals in the classroom have empirically been proven to enhance humane attitudes toward animals and these more humane attitudes persisted in a one year follow up (Ascione & Weber, 1999). This same study showed a generalization from humane attitudes toward animals to human-directed empathy. Thus, emotional connections made with animals can transfer to more empathic attitudes towards other persons.

Conclusion

Animal-assisted therapy and activity are useful modalities that can be easily incorporated into the counseling and school setting. Animals in counseling sessions and the classroom facilitate an atmosphere of trust, nurturance, and relationship building. Animals actually help a person to focus on a task because of an interest in interacting with the pet. The therapy animal is a nonjudgemental companion in the process of learning and development.

Basic training for AAT and AAA is available through some colleges and universities. Also, the national organization, Delta Society, offers a one-day workshop by trained instructors located across the nation (Delta, 2000).

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